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## **Indigestible biographies: limits to the narrative processing of life**

Biography – ‘the story of a person told by someone else’<sup>1</sup> – brings life into narrative form. In this article, I consider some of the fractures and failures that can attend this process, the places where the biographical text reveals life’s resistance to narrative. Drawing on perspectives from feminist biography and metabiography, I discuss various theoretical approaches to such moments of resistance. I then turn to a source of metaphor that was favoured in discussions of biography and historiography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the digestive system. The final section of the article demonstrates the versatility of digestion and its discontents as a metabiographical figure, with particular reference to Lytton Strachey and Friedrich Nietzsche. Moments of narrative rupture or failure in biography become conceptualisable as instances of life’s non-assimilability to narration: in biography, narrative bites off more of life than it can chew.

### **i) Resistance to narration 1: the non-event**

In 1761 Johnson appears to have done little.<sup>2</sup>

James Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson, LLD*, from which the above quotation is taken, occupies a uniquely significant place in the modern biographical canon, casting a long shadow for a variety of reasons. In methodological terms, *Life of Johnson*, first published in 1791, consolidated many aspects of existing biographical practice and set standards that would define approaches to biography over the following two centuries. The claims to comprehensiveness; the apparatus of verifiability; the chronological structure; the stated aim of preservation and memorialisation; and the assumption and assertion of the subject’s greatness as the underpinning rationale for the entire project – all of these elements of

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<sup>1</sup> Hermione Lee: *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* [1791], London: Oxford University Press, 1953, p. 253.

Boswell's approach combined to determine the biographer's task as the genre began to enjoy an era of unprecedented cultural centrality.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the terse sentence quoted above, which, in its original context, is thrown into such sharp relief by the otherwise mellifluous, often overblown prose surrounding it, serves as a starting point for reflection on the limits of a narrative conception of biography. The quotation forces us to confront some of the staple ingredients of biography under the sign of their own negation: event, action, anecdote, achievement, contribution, production: biography as the narrative account of a *doing being*. Here, Johnson *is*, but *does* nothing, or nothing much; here, the narrative memorialisation of the 'hero as man of letters' (as Thomas Carlyle was later to call Johnson)<sup>4</sup> threatens to break down, however briefly.

The statement of Johnson's non-doing throws up the question of how non-action, the non-event, the non-anecdote, might function in a biographical narrative as a moment of rupture or failure. Such moments suggest a departure from one of biography's fundamental assumptions: that life becomes narratable through the recounting of the actions and achievements of an individual subject. The 1761 sentence destabilises this basic biographical tenet; the text seems, momentarily, to resist the genre's underlying premise, and the 'What did he do?' question that legitimises the biographical enterprise suddenly reveals itself as unanswerable, or misconceived. Of course, Boswell's formulation, his use of the word 'appears', indicates that what we may be dealing with here is an absence of recorded and transmitted information, a gap in the archive. On the other hand, there may simply have been little or nothing to report.

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the cultural centrality of biography from the late eighteenth century onwards, particularly in the English-speaking context, see Peter France and William St Clair: *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; David Ellis, *Literary Lives: Biography and the Search for Understanding*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000; Nigel Hamilton: *Biography: A Brief History*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007; Bernhard Fetz (ed.), *Die Biographie: Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009; Wilhelm Hemecker (ed.), *Die Biographie. Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009; and Hermione Lee: *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Carlyle: *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1840). Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 133-158.

Either way, this moment in Boswell's otherwise verbose text draws attention to the relationship between biographical *narratives* and life *traces*, the archival and other resources on which biographies draw. This is a relationship of dependency and manipulation, evidence of which the biographical text does its best to suppress. Johnson may or may not have done little in 1761 (six pages' worth, out of a total of 1,383 pages in the Oxford University Press edition), and not much more in 1762 (twelve pages), but we hear what he did in 1763 at some length (the same edition runs to 66 pages for that year)<sup>5</sup> *because* the record of it exists – carefully researched and reconstructed by Boswell himself, through letters, conversations, and memories, and sedimented by the generations of biographers that follow him. The evidence, documentary and otherwise, and the contingency of its survival, preservation and accessibility, dictate the content of the narrative. Yet biographical texts tend to gloss over their reliance on contingency, preferring to smooth the motley collection of information retained in the archive into an illusory whole or, as David Nye argues in his groundbreaking antibiography on Thomas Edison, an object of contemplation, a fetish.<sup>6</sup> Like the fetishised commodity, the biographical text suppresses the knowledge of its own construction and production. It presents itself less as a thing made than as a thing discovered. It pretends to be an account of the life where in fact it is a narrative formed, constituted, from the life's traces – which is not the same thing.

This tension between life's traces and life 'stories' reflects a more basic tension between narrative and materiality. Time and again, biographers recount the thrill – a mark of the fetish – unleashed by the encounter with material objects, places, buildings, artefacts, which were inhabited, used, touched by the subject. We read Eunice Lipton on her encounter with traces of the life of Victorine Meurent;<sup>7</sup> Richard Holmes on the virtual presence of his Romantic subjects in the various locales to which he makes his biographical pilgrimages;<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Boswell: *Life of Johnson*, pp. 271-337.

<sup>6</sup> David E. Nye: *The Invented Self. An Anti-Biography, from Documents of Thomas Edison*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Eunice Lipton: *Alias Olympia. A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model and Her Own Desire*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Holmes: *Footsteps. Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985.

Brian Boyd on the experience of seeing the butterfly samples caught and described by Vladimir Nabokov.<sup>9</sup> The material life traces exert an auratic fascination because they have outlived the subject. Used as evidence for biography, they are cast in the role of a mute witness, speaking for the silent dead. The auratic charge of material evidence also applies to the encounter with the subject's handwriting, an object of biographical research which is, in the digital age, increasingly confined to historical subjects. We can speak in this context of a basic *materialism* of biography which sets it apart from other prose genres; as I have argued elsewhere, the material and spatial bodily presence that haunts biographical discourse as absence accounts for the marked reliance of biographical writing on metaphors from the visual arts, particularly portraiture and sculpture.<sup>10</sup> But if these mute material objects and traces 'speak', what do they say? Can the biographer interpret them, and how does she legitimise her position as their ventriloquist? How do biographers justify their confidence that life traces, properly interpreted, can give rise to a reliable, or at least plausible, account of a life? And what happens, in narrative terms, when this relationship between trace and story becomes intractable, fractured, or opaque?

## ii) Reflecting on biographical narration: metabiography

Any biographical text aims to provide a narrative constituted from knowledge of an individual, yet this knowledge is internally differentiated into various knowledge *types*. Biographical theory, and reflection on biography in general, is concerned with the difference between knowing a *fact* and knowing a *person*, or between knowing *about* a person and knowing a person. (Other languages fare better than English, as far as marking these distinctions is concerned, with *connaître* and *savoir*, *kennen* and *wissen*, for example, allowing for greater clarity.) If we accept Boswell's claim that Johnson did little in 1761, what conclusions does this allow us to draw about Johnson, regarding this year or any year? The spectre of the non-narratable non-event – the doing of little or nothing – leads us to confront some of the epistemological problems of biography, including the promise that a

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Boyd: *Stalking Nabokov. Selected Essays*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Caitríona Ní Dhúill: Lebensbilder: Biographie und die Sprache der bildenden Künste. In: Bernhard Fetz (ed.): *Die Biographie. Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009, pp. 473-500.

successful biography will, to paraphrase Richard Holmes, ‘resolve a human mystery’.<sup>11</sup> Life traces do not, in and of themselves, unravel an enigma; rather, they elicit a variety of possible readings. In recent years, the attempt to reflect systematically on the epistemological faultlines along which biography is precariously located has begun to go by the label *metabiography*. If, to repeat Hermione Lee’s pithy formulation quoted at the outset, biography is ‘the story of a person told by someone else’,<sup>12</sup> metabiography is a hermeneutics of biography, a reflexive or critical approach to interpreting the stories of people told by other people. The term itself is of fairly recent coinage – more recent than analogous terms such as metafiction (Patricia Waugh) and metahistory (Hayden White) – and, as is often the case with neologisms, it is newer than the phenomenon it names; theoretical reflection on biography accompanies biographical practice throughout its history.<sup>13</sup>

A recent prominent example of metabiography is Nicolaas Rupke’s work on Alexander von Humboldt;<sup>14</sup> Rupke’s approach corresponds roughly to the method of comparative biography outlined by Richard Holmes.<sup>15</sup> This line of metabiographical research traces the evolution of biographical treatments of a particular subject, reading biographies of that subject diachronically and contrastively in order to reveal shifting priorities and diverging understandings. Comparative metabiographical studies of this kind show how biographical material such as anecdotes – Roland Barthes’ ‘biographemes’ – are mediated through the historical and cultural context of their reception and retelling, generating a complex, layered biographical discourse as they travel across time: a well-known example is that of Jane Austen fainting at the news that she is to leave her family home, an incident given exemplary

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Holmes: *Sidetracks. Explorations of a Romantic Biographer*. London: HarperCollins, 2000, p. 375.

<sup>12</sup> Hermione Lee: *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> I discuss metabiography at greater length in my article ‘Towards an anti-biographical archive: mediations between life-writing and metabiography’, *Life Writing* 9 (2012), 279-289.

<sup>14</sup> Nicolaas Rupke: *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Holmes: ‘The Proper Study?’ In: *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France and William St Clair. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002, pp. 7-18.

metabiographical treatment by Hermione Lee in her essay 'Jane Austen Faints'.<sup>16</sup> As the field of biographical study on such figures and incidents becomes saturated, they emerge as fertile areas of metabiographical enquiry: the metabiographical reading focusses its attention not so much on the anecdote itself – on verifying or disproving it – as on the way in which it has become subject to various narrative strategies and representational-ideological agendas.

Metabiography, then, develops critical perspectives on the cultural and ideological investments of biography, and seeks new pathways through established or congested biographical discourses. Where a biographer aims to form a coherent narrative out of information about a past life, thus remaining within a more or less representationalist or reconstructive model, a metabiographer reads biographies as forms of discursive practice that raise wider questions around textuality, memorialisation, life-course models, the uses of the past, and the narrative interpretation of its traces. The metabiographer seeks to break with biographical convention, eschewing the familiar paradigms of reconstruction, narration, re-animation, in which the biographer's aim, and the reader's expectation, is that the subject will be 'brought to life' and become somehow 'knowable' through the telling of a story. Instead of using the life traces as the raw material of a life story and thus as means to an end, the metabiographer focusses on the conditions under which these life traces are constituted and preserved. A metabiographical perspective thus helps us to avoid the following kind of trap:

The laburnum and lilac were out along the Cam; roses bloomed again outside King's Chapel; the early peaches dropped from the walls of the Senate House; the scorpions reared their heads in the sunlight of the Great Court and all Cambridge came alive with the scents and colours of an early English summer. It was to be his last term.<sup>17</sup>

Or:

It was pleasant to imagine himself a successful playwright. Wearing a deerstalker hat, tortoiseshell spectacles, a carnation in his button-hole, he would stroll down Piccadilly

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<sup>16</sup> Hermione Lee: 'Jane Austen Faints'. In: Lee: *Body Parts. Essays in Life Writing*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2005, pp. 64-85.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Holroyd: *Lytton Strachey. The New Biography*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994, p. 111.

with an elastic tread, swinging his cloak. He drank tea at Rumpelmayer's, picked his way nimbly through picture galleries, whirled along in taxis...Or perhaps he should be a biographer?<sup>18</sup>

These two examples come from Michael Holroyd's biography of Lytton Strachey, and demonstrate what can happen when biographers allow themselves poetic licence in their attempt to set the scene of the subject's everyday existence at a particular time. The result is narratologically problematic – who is supposed to be speaking here? We are left with the sense of a simulation, Holroyd pretending to have had access to Strachey's impressions, inner thoughts, and mental landscape, and yet we cannot enter into the same relationship with this text as we would with a piece of illusionistic fiction, because we know that most of the time, Holroyd is keen to impress upon us that his is an account of 'what actually happened', of Strachey's life 'as it really was'. The peculiar tension created here between fiction and fact throws us back on the problem of how to interpret the latter: the scenes ask more questions than they answer. What did it mean to wear a deerstalker hat at this time? Was the buttonhole carnation a coded signal to fellow gay men? How much did tea at Rumpelmayer's cost, what percentage was it of the average industrial wage, and who was footing the bill seeing as Strachey was still a free floating bohemian with an at best uncertain income? How and why did evidence of the trips to Rumpelmayer's enter the archive, when evidence of other activities was not preserved? And perhaps most importantly – what traces do these jaunts around London and Cambridge, the self-stylisation as an Edwardian dandy, leave in Strachey's texts? How is biographical experience rendered productive through the creative act of writing?

This is not to suggest that Holroyd, who belongs to the generation of professional British biographers who came to prominence from the 1970s onwards – others include Peter Ackroyd, Victoria Glendinning, Hilary Spurling, and later Hermione Lee – fails to reflect on such questions. Holroyd's *Strachey*, particularly in the new version reworked in the 1990s from the original two-volume version of 1967-8, made a groundbreaking contribution to the study of Bloomsbury and English modernism, not least in terms of opening up the cultural history of homosexuality as a topic for serious scholarship. Yet as the examples above show, the biographer's concern with atmosphere and the illusionistic scene-setting of the everyday

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<sup>18</sup> Holroyd: *Lytton Strachey*, p. 256.



can lead the resulting text onto the very narratological and epistemological minefield that metabiography seeks to reconnoitre.

### iii) Resistance to narration 2: the biographical mundane

The pitfalls of Holroyd's prose alert us to the tensions within biographical narrative – between the scholarly reconstruction of documented life events; the synthesis and interpretation of this material; and the attempt to position it within broader horizons of meaning, whether cultural, historical, social, or aesthetic. The biographer constantly seeks to go beyond the chronicle of what is known or supposed to have happened, to address the question of how it becomes meaningful to later readers. The processes whereby biographical material is rendered meaningful deserve particular scrutiny wherever this material is concerned with the mundane details of everyday life, the repetitive cycles of bodily reproduction, household management, domestic labour. To remain with the aforementioned example, Holroyd's biography of Strachey: notwithstanding its narratological sleights of hand, this text achieves a fine balance between a concern with the subject's cultural contribution and distinctive position within the Bloomsbury group and aesthetic and sexual avant garde, on the one hand, and an appreciation of the politics and import of the everyday or mundane. On the relationship between Strachey and the artist Dora Carrington, Holroyd writes:

she had set out to make herself indispensable to him, and gradually she became indispensable. She was his housekeeper, his confidante, his nurse, his messenger, his loving friend. [...] She would see to it that he had measured doses of quinine, Bemax and Sanatogen and sensible clothes and plenty of cushions and Extract of Malt and rhubarb powder and eucalyptus oil and all the other supports and syrups the world had to offer.<sup>19</sup>

In narratological terms, following Gérard Genette, the mundane is the domain of *iterative* narration: the non-eventful, non-remarkable, repetitive actions of the everyday may not be deemed worthy of repeated narration, but in their implied cumulative effect they are constitutive of life itself. In Holroyd's account, it is Carrington's everyday ministrations to Strachey that facilitate the latter's literary production: her mundane domestic and emotional

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<sup>19</sup> Holroyd: *Strachey*, pp. 407-8.

labour is a prerequisite to his intellectual work, in a way that impacts problematically on her own tragic artistic subjectivity.

Determining the boundaries of the mundane is no straightforward matter. Because of its etymological root in *mundus*, the world, and the consequent secondary meaning ‘wordly’, ‘of the world’, the word mundane is a notorious false friend in terms of its secondary meanings and cognates in other languages. It is used here in the primary sense in English of everyday, quotidian, routine – with a hint of banality and non-eventfulness: the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests ‘humdrum, prosaic, lacking interest’ as synonyms. The problem for biography is immediately apparent. The dominant biographical paradigm conceptualises life as something fundamentally narratable, as a story that not only *can* be told, but is *worthy* of being told. Many of the details of everyday life, however, are non-narratable, storyless, or resistant to narration. It is this very mundanity, this resistance to narration, that threatens – or promises, depending on one’s point of view – to rupture the biographical ‘life as story’ paradigm.

Yet for many biographers and readers, the minute reconstruction of the subject’s everyday domestic conditions – knowing how they lived and slept, what they ate and wore – is central to the whole point of biography, or even *is* its point. There is a strong case to be made for this view of the mundane from the point of view of social history: details of the daily lives of past generations, including material culture and the prevailing division of labour, are immensely informative as manifestations of social structure, markers of class and group identity, and so on. However, the priorities of social history are not always reconcilable with those of biography, a fact which accounts for the often tense relationship between these two very different approaches to the past. “Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past”, wrote Strachey in his preface to *Eminent Victorians* in 1918. Broadly speaking, the social historian treats the biographical record as a point of entry into the social reality of the past; whereas for the biographer, the archival traces of the subject’s life provide the building blocks from which the story of that life is to be (re-)constructed. Of course, it is possible to combine these approaches – one thinks of Carolyn Steedman’s biography of her

own mother,<sup>20</sup> or Claire Tomalin's *The Invisible Woman*,<sup>21</sup> which is as much a reconstruction of the experiences and conditions faced by nineteenth-century actresses living at the edge of respectability as it is a biography of Ellen Ternan. But the focus of biography, by and large, is on the individual life *as an end in itself* rather than as a *means* to the end of social analysis. Readers go to biography asking 'what was she like?' rather than 'who else was she like?'. Where biographers seek out the mundane, it is in an effort to communicate a sense of the texture of the subject's lived experience. Details of everyday existence, from diet, health, and finances to the division of labour within the household – the combined effect of their presentation is to create an illusion of intimacy with the subject.

The mundane thus serves both sides of the binary of *auratic* versus *democratic* presentation: on the one hand, the otherwise unremarkable details of daily life are legitimated as narratable by dint of their association with the auratic subject; while on the other, the subject is normalised and rendered unremarkable through their association with the universal business of bodily reproduction and daily maintenance, becoming 'just a person like any other'. The mundane details of the everyday domestic conditions of culturally prominent individuals, their living arrangements, diet, finances, health, exercise regimen, travel arrangements seem to bring the elite 'down to earth', in keeping with the debunking and pedestal-toppling claims made for much modern biography, precisely since Strachey: the good and the great, the cultural elite, the geniuses and political leaders are, in their everyday lives and bodily realities, 'just like you and me'. In fact, however, biography's narration of the everyday often turns out on closer inspection to involve a 'hallowing' of detail, a transfiguration of the mundane: the iconic figure endows everyday detail with a spurious significance or aura. The suggestion that if James Joyce ate it, drank it, or wore it, we want to read about it, enhances rather than diminishing Joyce's place in the pantheon of cultural heroes which conventional biography does so much to create and perpetuate. The representation of the mundane in biography thus stands in a relationship of peculiar tension to the highly political questions of cultural prominence and historical visibility: the radical gesture of explicitly thematising the repetitive work of bodily reproduction and maintenance may not be so radical after all if it is

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<sup>20</sup> Carolyn Steedman: *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987.

<sup>21</sup> Claire Tomalin: *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens*. New York: Knopf, 1991.

enlisted in the service of the auratic ‘Great Man’ model of biography. The portrayal of the everyday in a biographical text raises these political questions, and it is important to distinguish between those biographies which explicitly thematise this political dimension, and those in which it remains undertheorised, constituting the political unconscious of the text.

An alternative approach to the mundane, one that ruptures the intractable tension between auratic and democratic presentation, is to consider it not in terms of the illusory intimacy or bodily presence it seems to promise, but narratologically – as a site of resistance to narrative. As noted above, the mundane aspects of a life are less narratable than other aspects, possibly even non-narratable. They resist full integration into a goal-directed, teleological story with beginning, middle, end. It is the preponderance of the mundane that gives many biographies their cumulative, paratactical structure, the – often frustrating – sense they convey that their major linking conjunction is not ‘because’, or ‘despite’, or ‘therefore’, but ‘and then...and then...and then’.

The importance – and yet difficulty – of representing repetitive, tedious, daily actions in a written or cinematic narrative is realised by experimental feminist texts such as Doris Lessing’s novel *The Golden Notebook* (“I must-dress-Janet-get-her-breakfast-send-her-off-to-school-get-Michael’s-breakfast-don’t-forget-I’m-out-of-tea-etc.-etc.”)<sup>22</sup> or Chantal Akerman’s 1975 film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. Such experiments – which are motivated by the feminist agenda of making occluded domestic labour visible – raise interesting implications for biography. How can biographical texts do justice to the repetitive aspects of (particularly domestic) life and labour, and why this might be a desirable alternative to the more conventional focus on artistic production, achievement, and work in the public sphere?

The approaches of Lessing, Akerman, even Peter Handke in his biography of his own mother,<sup>23</sup> draw attention to the variety of agendas that can be served by the minute detailing

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<sup>22</sup> Doris Lessing: *The Golden Notebook*. London 1993, S. 298

<sup>23</sup> „Auftischen, abräumen; „Sind jetzt alle versorgt?“ Vorhänge auf, Vorhänge zu; Licht an, Licht aus; [...] zusammenfalten, auseinanderfalten; ausleeren, füllen; Stecker rein, Stecker raus.“ Peter Handke, *Wunschloses Unglück. Erzählung*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972, p. 57. On this text as a feminist biography, see Philipp Weiss, ‘Die Grenzen des biographischen

of the everyday, whether in non-biographical or biographical texts. The radical text insists that the reproduction of the body is narratively non-productive or non-assimilable. By contrast, for most biographers, the daily round serves as a kind of foil or backdrop, against which the extraordinary, the event, the achievement, is thrown into relief. In the case of writers and artists – those prominent cultural figures who form the subject of choice for conventional biographies in the ‘Great Man’ mould (a mould which is not essentially recast through the inclusion of ‘Great Women’) – the mundane is of interest because it constitutes the conditions and the context for the creation of the artwork (or other historically visible achievement). It is in the portrayal of the mundane, then, that biography can most powerfully inform our understanding of the relationship between the reproductive labour of daily life and the productive labour of art.

Of course, the chosen formulation here, the ‘reproductive labour of daily life’ versus the ‘productive labour of art’, deliberately sets up a questionable dichotomy, recalling the feminist perspectives of earlier times (such as Simone de Beauvoir’s distinction between transcendence and immanence, or Nancy Chodorow’s concern with the reproduction of social roles). Aspects of quotidian existence such as diet, clothing, and housing arrangements *are* in fact productive in the broader sense – of subjectivities, values, realities. Nevertheless, there are strategic advantages to be gained from retaining the reproductive/productive distinction, not only because it has been of immense importance to feminist and gender theory, but also because it remains insufficiently theorised in many biographies. Furthermore, no consideration of the relationship between production and reproduction is complete without reference to the increasingly significant role of *consumption* as a cultural and social practice and a factor in identity: consumption is, we now acknowledge, a form of identity-production and political action, while also forming part of the reproductive activity of daily life. The full import of consumption – not only with regard to the cultural practices of consumer society, but in the more concrete senses of ingestion and the alimentary – for biography remain to be worked out. In what follows, the dimension of consumption in its relationship to biographical narratives, and narrative failures, is addressed in a tentative, exploratory way.

#### **iv) Food for thought: on the relation of the digestive and the biographical**

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Körpers: Peter Handkes *Wunschloses Unglück*.’ In: Wilhelm Hemecker (ed.): *Die Biographie. Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009, pp. 311-363.

What could be more mundane, more quotidian – in the sense that it has to happen every day, several times a day – than the alimentary? What could be more resistant to narration than the digestive process?

Biography's attempt to ground cultural production in the body and in the minutiae of daily life involves a recognition of the alimentary in the representation of historical subjects which, in turn, provokes a range of discursive engagements with nourishment, ingestion, digestion, and dyspepsia, starting with the body but quickly moving beyond it. So where we read, for example, in a biography of George Eliot that the author's travels in France and Spain in 1867 were curtailed by the delicate stomach of her partner George Lewes, because as Eliot put it 'a suggestion of oil and garlick in his food would cause him endless gastric miseries',<sup>24</sup> we are reminded of the insistent needs, habits and discomforts of the body that accompany, underpin and potentially derail literary production and cross-cultural engagement. Where Lytton Strachey exclaims with his customary panache in the course of his researches on his only female *Eminent Victorian*, Florence Nightingale, that his biographical subject is 'proving distinctly indigestible', and elsewhere where he states that to engage in biographical research is to 'pass a person through your mind, with all the documents, and see what comes out',<sup>25</sup> our attention is drawn to the digestive system as a metaphorical resource; but the context in which these remarks occur, namely in biographical documents pertaining to Strachey, reminds us of the permeability of the boundary between the metaphorical and the real. As Silke-Maria Weineck puts it, 'the fertility of the digestive metaphor depends precisely on the degree to which it is not quite a metaphor'.<sup>26</sup> Digestion as metaphorical resource lay close to hand in the case of Strachey; as is well documented, he suffered from a range of complaints affecting the digestive system, including haemorrhoids so severe that they required him on occasion to carry a large air cushion around with him wherever he went, including into court on the occasion of a tribunal concerning his conscientious objection during World War I.<sup>27</sup> Or, in a

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<sup>24</sup> George Eliot, *Letters*, quoted in Gordon Haight: *George Eliot: A Biography* (first published 1968). London: Penguin, 1985, p. 399.

<sup>25</sup> Holroyd: *Strachey*, p. 318, p. 422.

<sup>26</sup> Silke-Maria Weineck, 'Digesting the nineteenth century: Nietzsche and the stomach of modernity', *Romanticism* 12:1 (2006), 35-43 (here 42).

<sup>27</sup> Holroyd: *Strachey*, p. 348.

third example, where we read Friedrich Nietzsche's characterisation of Thomas Carlyle's life as 'a heroic-moral interpretation of dyspeptic conditions' ('diese heroisch-moralische Interpretation dyspeptischer Zustände'),<sup>28</sup> we are drawn in two directions simultaneously – back to the suffering body of Thomas Carlyle himself, for whom dyspepsia was 'that first and greatest, that sum total of all worldly tortures',<sup>29</sup> but also forward into the philosophy of history elaborated by Nietzsche, in which figures of healthy digestion versus digestive malfunction, of excess consumption followed by bloating and surfeit, are immensely productive.

It is no coincidence that digestive metaphors abound in the biographical context. For one thing, biography affirms the centrality of the living – thus, eating – body. The digestive cycle literally lies at the core of the biographer's concern – whether explicit or disavowed – with mundane bodily existence. For another, at the figurative and discursive level, in terms of sources, knowledge, and information, biographical texts must navigate between situations of feast or famine, surfeit or lack. To call upon Strachey once more, his preface to *Eminent Victorians* rails against the 'ill-digested masses of material' that characterise the voluminous biographies of the Victorian age; the metaphor recurs wherever matter seems resistant to form, right down to the present day – the complaint that biographical material is 'insufficiently digested', or that the resulting text is 'indigestible', is a frequent feature of reviews of biographies in scholarly and literary journals, for example. Furthermore, the moments of resistance to narration that I have sought to elucidate in the earlier sections of this article – the non-event, the archival silence, the quotidian and banal – could also be described as biographically 'indigestible', insofar as they are not conducive to narrative processing: they do not nourish the narrative account of life.

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<sup>28</sup> 'Ich las das Leben Thomas Carlyles, diese Farce wider Wissen und Willen, diese heroisch-moralische Interpretation dyspeptischer Zustände. – Carlyle, ein Mann der starken Worte und Attitüden, ein Rhetor aus Not, den beständig das Verlangen nach einem starken Glauben agaziert und das Gefühl der Unfähigkeit dazu (– darin ein typischer Romantiker!)'. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999, 15 vols, vol. 6, p. 119.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *The Love Letters of Thomas Carlyle and Jane Welsh*. Ed. by Alexander Carlyle. Vol. 1. 1909. Reprint. London: Forgotten Books, 2013, p. 273.

Thinking with Strachey, then, and also mobilizing one of Nietzsche's most fertile metaphors, we can conceptualise narration, and especially biographical narration, as a kind of digestive process, one that is susceptible to moments of failure and malfunction, to the epistemological dyspepsias that were so fundamental to the Nietzschean diagnosis of cultural *malaise*. My concluding thoughts are offered in the spirit of a first step towards a long-overdue cultural history of the trope of dyspepsia. Sustained attention to this trope, beyond the scope of the reflections formulated here, may yield new insights into consumption and processing, as these relate to the workings of the digestive system and its discontents. The aim of such a project would be to ascertain systemic homologies between the material or biological level and cognate cultural phenomena, the better to probe the various and distinctive pathologies that attend the latter.

Dyspepsia's metaphorical potential is tapped by Nietzsche in a number of texts; the second of the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen, Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, may serve as an example. Nietzsche begins this meditation or 'thought out of season' (the title depends on the translation) with a reflection on 'symptoms of our time', or cultural pathologies. Chief among these are cultural practices devoted to preserving traces of the past, telling stories about them, cultivating attitudes towards them, for example through historical knowledge and research. For our current purposes, we can include biography among these. The metaphors Nietzsche deploys to come at what he sees as the kernel of this problem are repeatedly drawn from the realm of ingestion and digestion. The first claim he makes is that the culture of his time is suffering from a *consuming* ('verzehrend') historical fever: it is not just that people are consuming history with such voracity that they are failing to digest it, but also that history itself is somehow consuming or wasting, laying waste to, the living. His polemical diagnosis of this problem is well known, and requires little elaboration here.<sup>30</sup> The bulk of this *Untimely Meditation* is taken up with distinguishing between three different ways of engaging with the past – the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical – and with exposing the devitalising tendencies that inhere in each of the three, the ways in which they are, variously, inimical to vitality and to life itself. What is of interest in the context of these concluding reflections on biographical indigestibility, and indigestible biography, is the prevalence of digestive imagery in Nietzsche's text. It begins by telling the reader to consider the herd that is grazing past ('die Herde, die an dir vorüberweidet'); these animals, part of

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<sup>30</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Weineck, 'Digesting the nineteenth century'.



Nietzsche's vast bestiary, are summoned to embody the non- or ahistorical life, the life lived in total absence of, and oblivion to, history. The herd engages in four activities on a cyclical basis: jumping around or perhaps gambolling ('umherspringen'); eating; resting; and digesting. The polar opposite of the herd animal (at least, in this context – as we know, the herd animal has different connotations in other texts by Nietzsche) is the person whose perception and feeling is dominated by the historical, but interestingly it is again a digestive metaphor, and a non-human one at that, that is deployed to dramatise the predicament of the person consumed by, because only able or willing to consume, history:

Ein Mensch, der durch u. durch nur historisch empfinden wollte, wäre [...] dem Tiere [ähnlich], das nur vom WIEDERKÄUEN u. immer wiederholtem WIEDERKÄUEN leben sollte.<sup>31</sup>

This image of the chewing of the cud, or rumination, is one that complicates and enriches the digestive metaphor further; while absent from the human digestive system, rumination, whereby that which is already partially digested is brought up and chewed over again and again, is, despite its proximity to the abject, not always negatively connoted once we begin to think digestion figuratively. In fact, the metabiographical reflections discussed in section ii) above might be construed as a form of rumination on the biographical – a bringing up again of what has already been consumed, in order the better to process it.

The first two attitudes or approaches to history that Nietzsche diagnoses, the monumental and the antiquarian, are also characterised through digestive metaphors: the monumentalists are accused of spoiling their own palates through excessive cultivation of a misplaced piety and thus refusing the sound nutrition of true art ('so bilden sie ihre Zunge und ihren Geschmack aus, um aus ihrer Verwöhntheit zu erklären, warum sie alles das, was ihnen von nahrhafter Kunstspeise angeboten wird, so beharrlich ablehnen');<sup>32</sup> while the antiquarians, who if anything come under even heavier fire than the monumentalists, are depicted as indiscriminate omnivores whose curiosity for all things ancient leads them to gorge

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<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999, 15 vols, vol. 1, p. 250.

<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche, *KSA* vol. 1, p. 264.

themselves on the mouldering dust of bibliographical irrelevancies.<sup>33</sup> The discussion culminates in another unforgettable image from the Nietzschean bestiary, that of conventional modern education likened to a rabbit swallowed whole by a snake: all the snake can do is lie very still in the sun, avoiding all unnecessary movement, until the digestive process has run its course. In all of this Nietzsche never condemns any of these basic attitudes outright, as the balance in his title between *Nutzen* and *Nachteil* suggests; he insists on the positive aspects of both monumental and antiquarian approaches to history, but sees their contemporary manifestations as pathologically hypertrophied and thus inimical to life. If we wish to consume history without risking a dyspeptic flare-up, we must consume it out of hunger, otherwise we will end up, and this is Nietzsche's diagnosis of the modern condition, dragging a monstrous number of indigestible knowledge stones around with us ('eine ungeheuere Menge von unverdaulichen Wissenssteinen');<sup>34</sup> 'die natürliche Beziehung einer Zeit, einer Kultur, eines Volkes zur Historie ist – hervorgerufen durch Hunger, reguliert durch den Grad des Bedürfnisses.'<sup>35</sup> The digestive metaphor supports this quest for a balanced approach to the traces of the past, as it furnishes a wealth of analogies through which to frame problems of sufficiency and excess, sustenance and debilitation, voraciousness and discrimination. In fact, one wonders whether deconstruction's long preoccupation with the pharmacy – as the site upon which the the poison / remedy binary is so productively and eloquently undone – might not have overshot its mark and fared better in the kitchen, or indeed the stomach.

Nietzsche is of course not alone in his use of digestive figures in accounting for the relationship between historical knowledge and contemporary life. As noted earlier, Strachey's attack on Victorianism, and particularly on Victorian historiography and biography, is replete with references to the indigestibility and stodginess of the grandparental generation's approach to, and representation of, the past. It is precisely this sense of digestive malfunction in the previous generation's approach to the past that prompts Strachey, and the Bloomsbury modernists with him, to reinvent biography as a slimmed-down, impressionist genre, liberated from the indigestible surfeit of life traces, and rendered appetising and bite-sized.

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<sup>33</sup> „Der Mensch hüllt sich in Moderduft; es gelingt ihm, selbst eine bedeutendere Anlage, ein edleres Bedürfnis durch die antiquarische Manier zu unersättlicher Neubegier, richtiger Alt- und Allbegier herabzustimmen; oftmals sinkt er so tief, daß er zuletzt mit jeder Kost zufrieden ist und mit Lust den Staub bibliographischer Quisquilien frißt.“ Nietzsche, *KSA* vol. 1, p. 268.

<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, *KSA* vol. 1, p. 272.

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *KSA* vol. 1, p. 271.

## **v) Conclusion**

In the foregoing, I have sought to pose the question of biography as both narrative *and* non-narrative. Biographies are, of course, narratives: they are life stories, the attempt to render life as story. But they also point to narrative's limits and limitations. Biography consolidates the divisions between production, reproduction and consumption: it is a vehicle for the cultural inscription of these divisions. Yet while it upholds them, it can also trouble them, through its insistence on the connection between cultural contributions in spheres such as the arts, politics and public life, on the one hand, and the mundane reproductive work of bodily maintenance, on the other. The metabiographical eloquence of digestive figures brings a further dimension to biography's concern with those aspects of bodily existence that are resistant to narration. Where biographical research and narration is conceptualised in terms of the processing and consumption of the traces of past lives, conditions of surfeit, satiety, indigestibility, or lack are evoked to dramatise the pathologies or failures of the biographical enterprise. Notwithstanding the genre's theoretical deficits and continued ideological investments in the 'Great Man' paradigm of the individual historical agent, biography plays an important role in rendering visible the too often invisible bodily mundane, and draws our attention, almost despite itself, to those aspects of life *as process* – including metabolic process – that cannot be readily assimilated into narrative.

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